

Local and Regional

Commentary

Valley Forge depends on volunteers and others to continue.

Help keep the spirit alive

By Mike Caldwell

Throughout the long, cold, wet day and well into the night of Dec. 19, 1777, thousands of exhausted Continental Army soldiers marched onto the muddy fields of Valley Forge. Without food, water, shelter or winter clothing, and after months of discouraging battles, each soldier must have wondered what his fate would be and whether anyone cared. Many had reached the end of their enlistments, and each had to make a choice to give up and go home or to stay and endure. Yet just six months later, after a tough winter of sickness and privation, hard work and training, Gen. George Washington's transformed troops marched out, chased down the British, and thumped them at the Battle of Monmouth.



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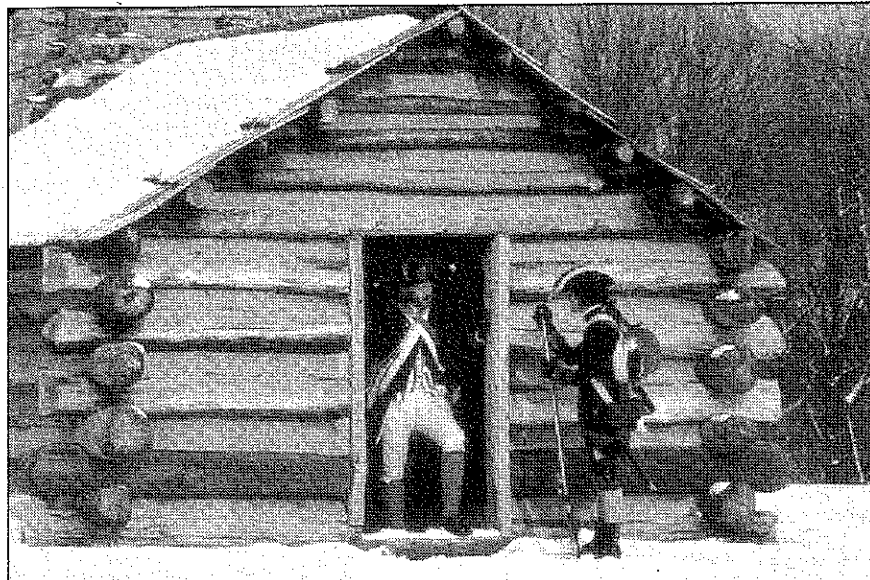
That story of commitment, sacrifice and triumph always has been the core meaning of Valley Forge.

Pvt. Joseph Plumb Martin, who was 17 when he served at Valley Forge, wrote that in spite of the miserable

winter, the troops had come to the aid of their wounded country and were determined to persevere.

The American Revolution came shockingly close to expiring at Valley Forge. The troops kept it alive through their commitment. They knew they had accomplished a miracle. Did they wonder whether anyone would remember?

In 1777, only the wealthy studied history. Nor was there any notion of public parks, except for the preserves of



royalty. We think the soldiers would be amazed by a 3,500-acre Valley Forge National Historical Park that preserves the site of their encampment and commemorates their stunning accomplishment for 12 million visitors each year. More important, we think they would be moved by, and proud of, the founding of the park by citizens, as well as the work of thousands of citizens who have joined in a 150-year tradition of stewardship as advocates, volunteers and partners in the work of preservation and education.

Each volunteer shares an understanding of the park as a meaningful place of inspiration, refuge, commemoration and pleasure. Volunteers and visitors alike gain strength and determination reflecting on the example of the individual soldier at Valley Forge, who was fighting for a cause much bigger than himself.

The example of the troops also inspires park staff, and we have renewed our commitment to preserve the park's outstanding historic and natural re-

sources and to provide a vibrant palette of activities and programs for visitors. New projects to restore historic structures have started. Cooperative community projects to manage traffic congestion, protect Valley Creek, and restore forest and meadow vegetation are under way. New storytelling benches, cell-phone tours, podcasts, exhibits, and traditional ranger-led tours are available to delight and inspire our visitors.

Two hundred thirty years have passed since those cold, hungry soldiers marched into Valley Forge and committed themselves to stay. On Dec. 19, we honor them. And at any time of the year, you can honor the commitment of the Continental soldiers by making commitments to stewardship of the park. Just log on to www.nps.gov/vafo to find out how to participate.

Mike Caldwell is superintendent of Valley Forge National Historical Park in Montgomery County.